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Review of beyond liberal democracy

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Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context. By Daniel A. Bell. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. xii+379 Pp. Paperback, ISBN 13: 978-0-691-12308-0.)

Beginning with an account of Ronald Dworkin's two-week visit to China in 2002 as an example of how "uniquely parochial" post–World War II Western liberal democratic theory and theorists have been, Daniel A. Bell proceeds to examine how theories of human rights, democracy, and capitalism ("main hallmarks of liberal democracy") have become substantially modified when transmitted to East Asian societies. Bell brings a wealth of interesting material to support his argument that "[w]hat is right for East Asians does not simply involve implementing Western-style political practices when the opportunity presents itself; it involves drawing upon East Asian political realities and cultural traditions that are defensible to contemporary East Asians" (p. 8). This review focuses on the middle section on democracy and deals only briefly with the first and last sections.

The first section opposes the imposition of universalist human rights theories on East Asia and argues that there are better alternatives for East Asian states to recommend or condemn actions morally, such as the "just war" discourse in the *Mencius*. Instead of attempting through intercultural dialogues to reconcile the different traditions in the abstract to achieve some "inter-civilizational" human rights, Bell recommends engagement between theorists and practitioners in order to find workable solutions to the ethical dilemmas and political difficulties confronting human rights organizations operating in East Asia. However, reflections on practice need to go much further than Bell suggests if it is to advance the theorizing of human rights.

It is questionable if there is more than contingent conjunction between capitalism and liberal democracy, but the last section is interesting for its ideas delineating alternative East Asian capitalism, democratic or not. Confucian emphasis on material welfare and care for needy family members, which differ from both right-wing (libertarian) and left-wing (Rawlsian) liberalism, provides support for illiberal constraints on property rights. In dealing with global labor migration, equal citizenship rights recommended by liberals may not offer the best answers to concerns that matter most to the migrants themselves, whereas formal and informal arrangements that encourage affective relations may serve them better in East Asian contexts. Confucian influence rather than liberal democracy has contributed to economic productivity in East Asian states and facilitated care for those often neglected in a capitalist system. In Bell's view, despite flaws that argue for reform in various aspects, there is much to be said for East Asian capitalism in which affective ties have greater function and value.

The section on democracy, understood in the "minimal" sense as free and fair competitive elections under universal franchise to fill policy-making positions, begins and ends with education, recognizing that democracy yields good government only when citizens are equipped through education with the motivation and ability to participate in democratic rule. Chapter 8 is an interesting account of Bell's efforts to practice "inclusive multiculturalism" in his classroom in Singapore, as a contribution to nurturing intercultural sensitivity and interethnic harmony that increase the possibility of democratic solutions to problems of interethnic conflicts.[1] This optimism is at odds with the skepticism about both the viability and desirability of democracy in East Asia in the rest of the section. Chapter 5 explores a link between the Greek emphasis on physical education and active citizenship which raises doubts about the latter, and so about democracy (not just liberal democracy) which requires it. According to Bell, ancient Greek active citizenship glorifies warfare and competitiveness, which is less defensible in contemporary societies; even more problematic, it threatens "to overwhelm all our other communal commitments, particularly ties to the family" (p. 149).

Bell seems to think that to be an active citizen would take up more time and effort than the average family-centered East Asian could afford. Consequently, he argues that democracy will take "minimal" forms within a larger framework of elite politics, since the average East Asian's "self-understanding" assumes that governing is the job of the elite. As an observation of existing East Asian priorities in everyday life, this may be so, but it would be an imperfect reality that belies the Confucian teaching that self-cultivation, ordering the family, governing the state, and pacifying the world constitute a single ideal that should be everyone's aspiration and responsibility. If Mencius (whom Bell often quotes as representative of Confucians) is right in averring that everyone can be a sage, then Bell's assumption may be misguided. Or it might be that many East Asians have not ventured into politics because undemocratic politics is not just unrewarding, but often downright dangerous, which makes focusing on the family the sensible course for the average individual.

Chapter 6 offers a reconciliation of elitism with democracy in the form of "a bi-cameral legislature, with a democratically elected lower house and a 'Confucian' upper house composed of representatives selected on the basis of competitive examinations" (pp. 165–66). Bell maintains that while the idea of government by an elite of the wise and virtuous is not unique to Confucianism, "Confucian societies *institutionalized* a stable mechanism capable of producing at least on occasion what was widely seen as a 'government of the best and brightest'" (p. 154). China's two-thousand-year-old meritocratic civil

service examination and its various contemporary approximations in Japan and Singapore have worked well and often enough for East Asians to appreciate entrusting political decisions to those who are "intelligent, adaptable, long-term minded, and public spirited" (characteristics that are not all that different from Confucian virtues according to Bell). This could be better than those who owe their career to the electorate, or worse, special interests which men short on wisdom and virtue, and are liable to put short-term, narrow, and selfish interests first.

However, unelected elites may and do abuse their power without the accountability and transparency that accompany equal political participation in a democracy, as Bell shows with actual examples and so he promotes the need to combine elitism and democracy. Besides discussing the selection process and measures to ensure that the upper house (*xianshiyuan* 贤士院) functions independently and effectively as an elite free to contribute its talent, wisdom, and virtue to the task of government, Bell proposes the use of constitutional mechanisms to resolve conflicts between the two houses. His evaluation of various possibilities for achieving a balance of power argues that a relatively weak Xianshiyuan is more feasible, but a stronger Xianshiyuan is more desirable. What drives Bell seems to be a mistrust of people's capacity to govern themselves, and such mistrust undermines democracy. If this is not a temporary lack that could be alleviated by education and more open public debates, for example, then what Bell is proposing is not so much a different kind of democracy more suited to East Asia, but an East Asian elitism that makes minimal and probably cosmetic concessions to people's demands and governs paternalistically for the people's good, even against their wishes.

In chapter 7, Bell shows how less-than-democratic East Asian states give minority groups a better deal than democracy because political elites have successfully resisted majority nationalism, and have been more willing to strike bargains with minority groups that benefit both parties. The dynamic of pressures to promote nation-building centered on the majority culture having to be reined in by minority rights in order to protect minority groups is absent in these states. Critics could challenge Bell's interpretation of the events and history of the various countries used as examples to support his argument. In the case of Singapore, one should at least seek corroborating evidence from historians before accepting Lee Kuan Yew's presentation of all, or even the majority, of the Chinese in Singapore as favoring Mandarin as the national and official language (especially as an example of how Lee was justified in ignoring the wishes of the people). The Chinese community was in fact divided into the Chinese-educated and English-educated, with a majority who had little edu-

cation. The last group could have been mobilized to favor Mandarin as a matter of loyalty to ancestral tradition (although Mandarin is not really the mother tongue of most Chinese in Singapore, as they came from the southern provinces of China, such as Fujian and Guangdong). Nevertheless, they could just as easily have been swayed by the argument that English would give everyone the means for a better living.

Evidence that the subsequent decline of Chinese-medium schools was due not so much to government neglect as decline in enrollment resulting from parents' choice indicates that the economic argument might have carried more weight than cultural nationalism. It could be argued that the special geopolitical and historical circumstances of Singapore present little motivation for majoritarian nationalism on the part of the people, which would cast doubt on Bell's claim that it is an example of the political elite's greater ability to resist majority nationalism in less-than-democratic states. If the Chinese-educated elite had won power, it is likely that Mandarin would have been given a dominant place in Singapore, but not necessarily because it was what the people wanted. So, as it turns out, Singapore was fortunate that, as Bell pointed out, the PAP "founding fathers" were English-educated and therefore benefited from making English the official language and main medium of education (p. 194), and had no qualms relegating Mandarin and the "mother tongues" of other ethnic groups to second languages in schools.

With the example of Indonesia's Chinese minority's ability to prosper under Suharto, clearly Bell does not intend to condone the corruption that is central to that "bargain." However, the example reveals a more general problem with bargains between minority groups and less-than-democratic governments. Such governments are not accountable to the people in a transparent system, and often would agree to bargains that benefit the few individuals in power at the expense of the majority. Democratic governments, even if the members are mainly from the majority ethnic groups, could also bargain with minority groups. Such bargains in democracies would be more likely to benefit both the majority and the minority and would not, as evidenced by what happened in Indonesia, increase resentment against a minority perceived to be rich and privileged (even though not everyone of that group is so). While it is true that where such resentment exists, democratization could endanger lives and properties of resented minority groups, and therefore caution as advised by Bell is certainly warranted, it just means that the process of democratization should be planned and controlled, rather than indefinitely postponed. The ethnic violence in Indonesia in 1998 is due to disintegration of the state's ability to maintain law and order. Democ-

ratization need not mean such extreme political instability. If anything, it is prolonged oppression and injustice under authoritarian governments, rather than democratization per se, that cause such chaos once the state power weakens under the stress of populist discontent. If there is a lesson for China and other less-than-democratic states in Asia, it should be the wisdom of democratizing gradually from a position of strength, while keeping the state's power for ensuring law and order intact, instead of being forced to "democratize" overnight by a disgruntled populace.

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Endnote

1. Bell mentions that he was told to take Mill's *On the Subjection of Women* off his reading list while was a member of the Political Science Department at the National University of Singapore in the 1990s. The university has changed much since then. Since assuming my appointment in the university in 2000, I have not heard of any staff being asked to change their syllabi for ideological/political reasons. We have also been teaching Feminist philosophy, and implemented a Gender Studies minor program, without any grandparents or parents turning up to complain about the corruption of their youth.

Ethos of Chinese Culture. By Wang Keping. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2007. Pp. 1–241. Paperback, ISBN 978-7-119-04809-3.)

Constructing a model of transcultural transformation capable of loosening cultural boundaries, breaking homo-cultural-centrism of any kind, and promoting transformational creation in both a national and cosmopolitan sense are the objectives of Wang Keping's *Ethos of Chinese Culture*.

In contrast to ancient Greek thought, ancient Chinese thought has not been properly studied by scholars in the West. In order to reveal the Chinese ways of thinking and at the same time to create the context for of a meaningful dialogue between East and West, in this book, as in other works of his, Wang follows the same twofold strategy. He examines the influences of various currents of Western thought (idealism, romanticism, pragmatism, and so on) on Chinese scholars since the late nineteenth century, while tracing the components of Chinese thought that have made possible the convergence of Western and Chinese cultural traditions. In so doing, the author constructs a model of universalization of cultural localities that opposes economic globalization, which, with its positivistic reductionism and globalizing